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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest discusses meeting the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered school youth, i.e., supporting their ability to learn while maintaining an environment for them that is free from physical and psychological abuse. It describes the various policy initiatives protecting the rights of lesbian and gay students and indicates that urban schools are now developing programs to help lesbian and gay students feel included and respected. Initiatives include the use of gay and lesbian support groups that can offer services such as counseling, peer support, health information, and referrals; curricula changes that include positive references about gays and lesbians and inclusion of gay studies courses; and appropriate training for school staff that can be delivered by gay service organizations. Special schools geared toward gays and lesbians, such as Harvey Milk High School in New York City, have also been developed. A list of suggestions is provided for districts and schools that want to develop supportive environments for gay and lesbian students without necessarily implementing a full-scale program or adding significantly to their budgets. (Contains 10 references.) (GLR)

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Improving the School Experience for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students.

ERIC Digest No. 101

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

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IMPROVING THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE FOR GAY, LESBIAN, AND BISEXUAL STUDENTS

Interest in meeting the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth is growing, largely as a result of three general trends: 1) acknowledgment by educators that all identifiable groups of students need support unique to their situation; (2) the increasing number of students declaring their homosexuality; and (3) increasing victimization of lesbians and gays. Among the supporting arguments is that educators have a social responsibility to provide an environment that supports the ability of *all* students—including lesbians and gays—to learn and that is free from physical and psychological abuse (Sears, 1987).

Lesbian and gay student initiatives to date have been in urban areas, where these students feel most free to be visible and to request services, and where opposition to support is least likely. Also, cities have gay and lesbian service organizations for adults that include youth programs or that lobby boards of education to implement programs.

Barriers to Education

Studies have shown that gay and lesbian students are far more likely to have been abused or otherwise victimized, abuse substances, prostitute themselves, attempt suicide, and be homeless than straight youth (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). Many fear violence and harassment from their peers, and constant anxiety inhibits their ability to learn. Some try to make themselves invisible in school so their homosexuality will not be detected, and as a result, limit their learning experiences. Even gay students without such severe problems have a more difficult adolescence than straight students because they feel even more confined by the pressure to conform, and believe that an essential part of them is being dismissed, despised or deleted from school life (Khayatt, 1994).

Although these factors may cause poor school performance and high dropout rates, lesbian and gay students "are perhaps the most underserved students in the entire educational system ... . discrimination often interfere[s] with their personal and academic development" (Uribe, 1994, p. 112).

Homophobia also negatively affects straight students' education in ways that transcend simply the effects of hating. Fear of being considered gay can drive them to embrace narrowly defined and limiting sex roles. The decision about whether to participate in sports—real guys must; real girls won't—is a prime example (Grayson, 1987).

Opposition to Education Initiatives

Many policy makers oppose presenting homosexuality in a positive way, or even mentioning it at all, in school. Locally, groups have been quite effective in stopping school efforts to teach positively about homosexuality, or even to provide information about it. The most publicized example is the successful campaign against the New York City Rainbow Curriculum for elementary grades. Around the country, an increasing number of school board candidates are emphasizing their opposition to education on homosexuality in their campaigns.

Policies

Laws and regulations that prohibit discrimination against specific groups not only provide penalties for violators, but also dignify the existence of those groups and suggest that the climate is not sympathetic to people who express bigotry in even legally protected ways. There have been some government initiatives to protect the rights of lesbian and gay students (and sometimes teachers) in particular, a sampling of which is provided below. Some school districts and schools have developed specific policies, but local antidiscrimination legislation and policies that protect gays overall also protect gay students.

At the Federal level, activity has largely consisted of court decisions, which have generally been narrow, and apply only to districts in which the court is located. An early decision in Rhode Island (Fricke v. Lynch, 1980) can be considered one of the most radical: it allowed two men to attend their senior prom as a couple (Dutile, 1986).

A Wisconsin law, the first statewide legislation of its kind, mandates that every public school district adopt and disseminate a policy prohibiting bias, stereotyping, and harassment. Nevertheless, state support for lesbian and gay students has been limited to workshops for counselors and distribution of a pamphlet describing the policy and materials from private organizations.

Massachusetts has established the only statewide Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. Its first report reviewed the lives of Massachusetts lesbian and gay adolescents and presented a comprehensive set of recommendations that became the basis of the Massachusetts Department of Education's Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students, which includes workshops for school people and students (Governor's Commission, 1993).

One of the seven Los Angeles Unified School District commissions is devoted to gay and lesbian education. It makes recommendations to the Board of Education on meeting the needs of lesbian and gay students.

Programs

Urban schools around the country have implemented many different types of programs both to help lesbian and gay students feel included and respected and to educate other students about homosexuality and the achievements of gays throughout history.

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Support Groups

Groups help lesbian and gay students—both those who are out and those who do not publicly acknowledge their orientation—overcome their fear and isolation, and encourage them to remain in school (Lipkin, 1992). Their services include counseling, peer support, health information (including safer sex), and referrals. Since some teens are estranged from their families, housing and legal services may also be provided. Some groups work with families and do antibias training with teachers. Groups can be funded by the government and/or private sources, and work city-wide (e.g., Hetrick-Martin Institute, New York; Project 10, Los Angeles; University of Minnesota Youth and AIDS Project, St. Paul) or in a single school (Project 10 East, Rindge and Latin School, Cambridge). The Bridges Project is a national network of groups serving lesbian and gay youth.

Curriculum

Like all efforts to increase the multiculturalism in curricula, infusing information about homosexuality can be done in several ways, as appropriate for grade level (Hart & Parmeter, 1992): portraying lesbians, gays, and bisexuals matter-of-factly; using neutral language to describe lesbians and gays; identifying lesbians and gays of accomplishment; gay and lesbian literature courses; and gay studies courses.

Staff Development

School staff is crucial to establishing and maintaining a climate where lesbian and gay students feel safe and able to learn. Staff, therefore, may receive training that includes: basic information and about homosexuality and the needs of gay students, crisis intervention and violence prevention strategies, and appropriate responses to expressions of homophobia.

Several gay service organizations offer staff development activities and materials. The National Education Association (NEA) offers its members (especially those unfamiliar with homosexuality) two workshops for dealing sensitively with colleagues and students. NEA also responds to requests from its locals with referrals on materials, speakers, and additional trainers.

Special Schools

One school especially for lesbian and gay students has been in operation nearly a decade: the Harvey Milk High School in New York City, a joint project of the Board of Education and Hetrick-Martin. Its purpose is to provide a supportive environment for students who were on the verge of dropping out of traditional school. Another high school, the EAGLES Center in Los Angeles, has been operating for two years (*Project 10 Handbook*, 1993).

Other Education Initiatives

Districts and schools that want to provide a supportive environment for lesbian and gay students and educate straight students about homosexuality, without necessarily implementing a full-scale program and without adding significantly to their budgets, can choose from the following list of suggestions:

- Include gays and lesbians in non-discrimination policies, and expressions of homophobia on the list of prohibited behaviors in the school policy manual.
- Offer support and protection for teachers who come out so lesbian and gay students can have role models and a source of support.
- Give organizations of lesbian and gay students the same privileges as other groups, and allow same-sex couples to attend events.
- Create an atmosphere where students can feel free to reject sex stereotyped roles.
- Provide anti-bias and violence prevention training that includes self-protection strategies.
- Include books on homosexuality, both informational and fiction, in the library.

— Wendy Schwartz

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Resources

Bridges Project of the American Friends Service Committee, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.

Gay and Lesbian High School Curriculum and Staff Development Project, Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 210 Longfellow Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138.

Hetrick-Martin Institute, 2 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003.

Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, 320 W. Temple St., Los Angeles, CA 90012.

National Education Association, Human and Civil Rights Division, 1201 16 St., NW, Washington, DC 20036.

Project 10, 7850 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90046.

Project 10 East, 459 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02138.

Sex Equity Program, Equity and Multicultural Education Section, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, PO Box 7841, Madison, WI 53707.

University of Minnesota Youth and AIDS Project, Wingspan, 100 N. Oxford St., St. Paul, MN 55104.

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